

Reflection for Morning Prayer: Jeremiah 31, 27-37; John 12, 20-33.

We are living in very strange times, so it is perhaps not surprising that people sometimes say very strange things. If, indeed, they say anything at all – the surreal experience of standing in the queue outside Sainsbury's, each of us with our trolley, each of us ten feet away from anyone else, and all of us completely silent – will stay with me for a long time. Perhaps predictably, there are people saying that the pandemic is God's punishment on us for allowing same-sex marriage, environmental pollution, immigration, women priests, exploiting the planet, pornography on the internet – they choose whatever their pet hate happens to be and are certain that God is taking his revenge for it.

Those of us who say Evening Prayer as part of our daily office have been mired in the book of Jeremiah for the past month, and we haven't finished yet. Jeremiah isn't a cheerful prophet. The other book of his prophecies is called Lamentations, which rather gives the game away. The start of today's first reading is a good summary of what Jeremiah told Israel and Judah that God was going to do to them: pluck up and break down, overthrow, destroy and bring evil, because of the way they had behaved. No doubt that would have included afflicting them with Covid-19 if Jeremiah had ever heard of viruses.

But Jeremiah goes on to say something which the present-day prophets of doom do not. He points out that God says: 'I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.' It is the beginning of this new covenant that the Greek visitors in the gospel reading are asking to see. The fact that they are described as 'Greeks' doesn't mean that they weren't Jewish. Greek was very widely spoken across the Mediterranean region in the first century. All it really means is that they were foreigners. They had come to Jerusalem to worship at the Passover festival; they had heard about Jesus and they wanted to see him.

John doesn't tell us whether they actually do, literally, see Jesus. Instead he describes Jesus telling the disciples that now, at last, what he has come to earth to bring about is going to happen. 'The hour is come.' The new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah is being fulfilled. For anyone to be part of this, it will not be enough simply to see Jesus. They must take action, make a deliberate move – come – abandon the way of life they have been living until now, die to that life and follow him.

It won't be easy. It wasn't easy for Jesus to fulfil his destiny, and it won't be easy for his followers. Dying to your old life means a complete transformation of thought and behaviour. You can't do this as a looker-on, as someone who merely sees Jesus. It means complete commitment, dedication, perseverance, faithfulness. If you make that commitment and stick to it you will become more like Jesus; more of a pointer towards him.

These are strange times. As well as difficulties they bring opportunity: to build community, to give service, to be thoughtful, generous, even self-sacrificing. An elderly, sick Italian priest gave his ventilator to a young boy. Let us hope that such a sacrifice, or anything similar, will not be a choice that anyone else has to make. Perhaps today's answer to the request; 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus', could be something – even if it is just a glimmer – in our own behaviour which shows that, although our buildings are shut and 'going to church' is something we can't do, the spirit of Jesus is alive in our homes, our streets and our hospitals. No-one has any idea what is going to happen. But as, over the next two weeks, we go with Jesus to the cross, let us commit, follow, serve, and keep the light of Christ alive in our hearts so that it may shine for others.